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ABSTRACT

This paper examines trends toward cooperation and collaboration between colleges of further education and universities in the United Kingdom especially increasing political pressures for wider access to postsecondary education. It notes that the trend toward a single postsecondary sector within which students can move freely from one level to another is not accompanied with commensurate increases in resources provided to institutions of higher education. The paper reports on an analysis of retention, success, and failure rates of students (N=1329) who had either transferred from a further education college (N=465) or entered the university as first-year students over the period 1994-1998. Students were working at either regular or honors degree levels in accounting, commerce, and business studies. Overall, the students transferring from further education colleges were significantly more likely than first-year entry students to achieve the Degree or Honours Degree qualification. Results suggest that institutions in both sectors can increase student intake without prejudicing program quality or students' learning experience. However, this paper raises concerns about how the new "Advanced Higher" qualification will relate to accreditation requirements of professional bodies and governmental policy. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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NAPIER UNIVERSITY

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CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A SEAMLESS EDUCATION SECTOR

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Dolores Vura
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CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A SEAMLESS EDUCATION SECTOR

ABSTRACT

In today's political environment there is a vision of the emergence of a single post-school education sector within which students can move freely from one level to another. This will require increasing collaboration between institutions and colleges and an attitudinal change particularly in the University Sector. This paper questions whether or not this collaborative approach achieves the objectives of the institutions and of the students involved and draws conclusions based on an analysis of retention/success/failure rates of access students over the period 1994-1998.

CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A SEAMLESS EDUCATION SECTOR

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years increasing pressure has been put on Higher Education (HE) Institutions to increase their student numbers with little or no commensurate increase in resources. In particular the UK Government now has a vision of a single post school education sector within which students can move freely from one level to another. This vision has major implications for Universities who are used to, and are more comfortable with, a climate of competition and "safeguarding standards" and who have, in many instances, a "tunnel vision approach" to student selection.

2. POLITICAL CLIMATE

The UK government has long been committed to a policy of wider access and an increased participation rate in Higher Education. This policy was stated and re-iterated in the Government White Paper published in 1987, 'Higher Education - Meeting the Challenge'; the 1991 White Paper, 'Higher Education - A New Framework'; and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992. This Act, in particular, positively encouraged Higher Education institutions to increase opportunities for flexibility, so far as advanced entry was concerned, and underlined the need for closer associations to be forged between Higher Education and Further Education (FE) Colleges with a view to developing

programmes that would meet the needs of the economy, of employers and of students with different needs and backgrounds.

More recently two Green Papers - "Government Green Paper: The Learning Age" (England & Wales) (July 1998)) and "Scottish Office Green Paper: Opportunity Scotland - A Paper on Lifelong Learning" (July 1998), reflecting many of the recommendations from the National and the Scottish Committees of Inquiry into Higher Education (The Dearing and the Garrick Reports 1997), are having a major impact on Further and Higher Education in the UK. These reports forecast that much of the anticipated expansion of student numbers would be at the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Higher National Diploma (HND) levels - delivered in Further Education Colleges - with related implications for increased demand for places on degree programmes delivered in the HE sector - and, taking on board the findings of the Howie Committee (SOED 1994), recognised the need for a national framework of qualifications which would provide the opportunity for progression from one level to the next, allowing students to accumulate credits for learning achieved which could be transferred from one institution to another to facilitate the attainment of higher levels of qualifications. Specifically adoption of the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS), as a model, was proposed. The special role of the FE Colleges in providing "sub-degree" higher education was recognised and promoted and HE Institutions were encouraged to establish formal links with FE Colleges to facilitate the progression of FE students into HE Degree programmes. This is similar to the relationship between the Community Colleges and the Universities in the United States.

3. CONSTRAINING FACTORS

This institution's mission statement reinforces its commitment to "working in partnership to widen access" and "to delivering education that is personally and professionally useful in ways that meet the changing needs of its students" - all of whom have the same goal and expectation - to achieve the highest qualification commensurate with their academic ability which will lead them to relevant employment (McLachlan and Wood: 1994(1)).

However, the introduction of a £1,000 per annum fee payable by each student and the continuing reduction in levels of financial support available to students have reduced the number of potential students looking for places in the University sector - many preferring to pursue sub-degree qualifications at a local College to keep the cost of education to a minimum. Yet there is still an expectation that staff will recruit ever increasing student numbers to ensure, at minimum, a steady state of funding. One solution to this dilemma has been to increase links with the Further Education colleges with a view to ensuring additional students, mainly in the later years of the programmes offered by the University. These moves have become necessary - and also possible - as a result of the major changes in the structure of Further and Higher Education in Scotland in recent years brought about by the Further and Higher Education Acts of 1992.

4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

From the HE perspective - the shift in the Binary Line and the establishment of the new Universities with autonomy to manage their own affairs and finances, overseen by the newly established Funding Councils, made it easier to design programmes that would articulate with each other and with sub degree qualifications at HNC and HND levels. In the FE sector the Further Education Colleges were now in charge of their own future and could invest in areas of specific expertise, ensuring access to a comprehensive range of education and training and maximising their efficiency and effectiveness. In addition the students' expectations have risen and, whereas in the past Further Education was seen as an end in itself, it is now looked on as a stepping stone to greater things. Closer collaboration between HE and FE has been one way of meeting the needs of all parties and of complying with the directives of Government.

5. COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

This Institution in general, and its Business School in particular, has had a long history of collaborating with Further Education Colleges - previously on an informal basis (McLachlan & Wood 1994 (2) and 1998). The more "forward looking" members of staff could see the opportunities presented by establishing defined entry routes to the later years of degree programmes for students from the FE sector. Previously informal arrangements with FE Colleges have been formalised resulting in the establishment of formal partnership agreements with ten FE Colleges with a view

to facilitating the transfer of FE students to degree programmes at Napier. A number of different approaches have been taken to maximise opportunities for FE students:

- Access programmes have been developed in collaboration with HE Institutions. These programmes are delivered by FE Colleges targetting students with no other formal educational qualifications and are recognised as acceptable entry qualifications to the first year of specified degree programmes in a number of the HE Institutions.
- HNC/HND requirements for advanced entry to the later years of Degree Programmes have been specified in terms of Higher National Units to be completed and the number of passes at Merit level required to provide essential underpinning for specific Degree Programmes.
- Bridging Courses have been developed to make the transition from FE to HE easier for FE students. For example FE students enrolled on Business School Programmes undertake an "Entry to HE" Module entitled "Effective Learning" in the two weeks prior to the commencement of their Session of entry. Successful completion of this module gives the student 15 credits which count as 15 out of the 30 credits required from elective (free choice) modules for completion of their Degree.
- Where a prospective student has obtained an HNC or HND qualification but without the Merit or specific Unit passes required for entry to a particular Degree Programme they can transfer the credits attributable to their qualification under the CAT Scheme (120 credits HNC/240 credits HND) to Napier and undertake a degree programme tailored specifically for them.

However, having made the transition from FE to HE can they cope with the very different learning environment? An HE Institution is larger; more impersonal; relies more on private study and directed learning; has larger lecture groups and involves a greater reliance on examinations than is usually the case for HNC/HND programmes which are largely competency and learning outcome based.

6. ANALYSIS OF DIRECT ENTRY PERFORMANCE IN THREE DEGREES 1994-1998

This study involves the graduating years at Degree and Honours level for each of the three degrees in Accounting, Commerce and Business Studies from 1994 to 1998 inclusive (five outputs) analysing the performance of 1329 students over the three programmes graduating in the five year period and focusing on the performance of direct entry students to Year 2 (HNC) and Year 3 (HND) when compared to the performance of the traditional students entering in Year 1. The abbreviations used in the Tables are as follows:

Deg	=Degree	Deg Dist	=Degree with Distinction
2/1	=Upper Second	2/2	=Lower Second

Act Proc = the number of students eligible to proceed to Honours who did in fact proceed.

BA (Hons) BA Accounting: The output from the BA (Hons) BA Accounting Programme is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Analysis of Output for BA (Hons) BA Accounting 1994-98

BA ACCOUNTING																												
Year of Output	DEGREE OUTPUT															HONOURS OUTPUT-No Honours Output in 1993/94												
	Total	Deg	%	Deg Dist	%	Deg Proc	%	Act Proc	%	D/Dis Proc	%	Act Proc	%	Fail W/draw	%	Total	First	%	2/1	%	2/2	%	Third	%	Deg	%	Deg Dist	% Fail W/draw
1993/94																												
YR 1 Entry	47	9	19	2	4	35	74	34	72					1	2													
YR 2 Entry	14	6	43			8	57	5	36					0	0													
YR 3 Entry	10	3	30			4	40	4	40					3	30													
Totals	71	18	25	2	3	47	66	43	61					4	6													
1994/95																												
YR 1 Entry	37	9	24	2	5	20	54	15	41	5	14	3	8	1	3	34	3	9	5	14	22	65	3	9	1	3		
YR 2 Entry	18	3	17	4	22	8	44	7	39					3	17	5			1	20	3	60	1	20				
YR 3 Entry	22	10	45	1	5	6	27	4	18	1	5	1	5	4	18	4					3	75	1	25				
Totals	77	22	29	7	9	34	44	26	34	6	8	4	5	8	10	43	3	7	6	14	28	65	5	12	1	2		
1995/96																												
YR 1 Entry	24	4	17			18	75	15	63	1	4			1	4	18	1	6	8	44	7	39	2	11				
YR 2 Entry	16	4	25			9	56	8	50	2	13	2	13	1	6	7					5	71	2	29				
YR 3 Entry	10	6	60	1	10	2	20	2	20	1	10	1	10			5			1	20	2	40	2	40				
Totals	50	14	28	1	2	29	58	25	50	4	8	3	6	2	4	30	1	3	9	30	14	47	6	20				
1996/97																												
YR 1 Entry	26	9	35	1	4	16	61	13	87							15	1	7	3	20	9	60	1	7	1	7		
YR 2 Entry	13	3	23			6	46	6	46	1	8	1	8	3	23	10	1	10	5	50	4	40						
YR 3 Entry	15	8	53	1	7	2	13			1	7			3	20	3			2	67	1	33						
Totals	54	20	37	2	4	24	44	19	35	2	4	1	2	6	11	28	2	6	10	36	14	50	1	4	1	4		
1997/98																												
YR 1 Entry	17	3	18	1	6	10	58	8	47	1	6			2	12	13			4	31	9	69						
YR 2 Entry	12	6	50	1	8	3	25	2	17					2	17	7			3	43	4	57						
YR 3 Entry	15	8	53	2	13	4	27	4	27					1	7													
Totals	44	17	39	4	9	17	39	14	32	1	2			5	11	20			7	35	13	65						
O/all Total	296	91	31	16	5	151	51	127	43	13	4	8	3	25	9	121	6	5	32	26	69	57	12	10	2	2		

This is a four year programme with students who successfully complete the third year being awarded a Degree or a Degree with Distinction (where the weighted average mark for the third year performance is at least 65%) and being given the opportunity to progress to the Honours Year (Year 4) if they so wish. Having been given that opportunity some progress to Honours but some choose to leave with their Degree and find employment or to go on to postgraduate or professional study.

So far as the Accounting Degree is concerned there is a fairly even spread of advanced entry across Years 2 and 3 due to a number of articulation arrangements with local FE Colleges and to students progressing from the University's own Certificate/Diploma in Accounting programme. This has helped to lessen the impact of the steady decline in first year student numbers over the period 1993-94 to 1997-

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98. It is not so vital for Accounting students to progress to the Honours year as the Professional Bodies base their exemption policies on the acquisition of an accredited degree therefore not all of the students eligible to proceed to Honours choose to do so.

Those students entering in the second and third years of the programme have proved themselves equally capable of achieving a degree qualification as are the first year entrants although the percentage failure rate for those exiting with a Degree in third year has been higher for the direct entrants than for the first year entrants - an overall percentage failure rate of 14% compared with 5% for those who entered in year one. In contrast, all students progressing to the Honours year, regardless of their point of entry, have been successful with most achieving a lower second honours classification. Only six First Class Honours were awarded and of these five were achieved by first year entry students perhaps because they benefited from the continuity of studying in a degree orientated way throughout their programme of study while those entering in Year 2 or Year 3 from the competency based HNC/HND programmes had to adjust to the University study patterns and assessment requirements. However, overall there is little difference in the level of attainment at Honours level when comparing the first year entry students with those entering in later years of the programme.

BA (Hons) BA Business Studies (Sandwich): The output from the BA (Hons) BA Business Studies Programme is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 Analysis of Output from BA (Hons) Business Studies 1994-98

BA BUSINESS STUDIES																								
Year of	DEGREE OUTPUT							HONOURS OUTPUT																
Output	Total	Deg	%	Deg Dist	%	Fail W/draw	%	Total	First	%	2/1	%	2/2	%	Third	%	Deg	%	Deg Dist	%	Fail W/draw	%		
1993/94																								
YR 1 Entry	4	4	100					73			26	36	40	55	3	4	4	5						
YR 2 Entry	3	3	100					4					3	75			1	25						
YR 4 Entry	20	18	90	2	10			14			2	14	12	86										
Totals	27	25	93	2	7			91			28	31	55	60	3	3	5	6						
1994/95																								
YR 1 Entry	7	7	100					53	1	2	26	49	22	41	2	4	2	4						
YR 2 Entry	3	3	100					15	1	7	3	20	10	66	1	7		0						
YR 4 Entry	12	12	100					22	1	4	7	32	13	59		0	1	4						
Totals	22	22	100					90	3	3	36	40	45	51	3	3	3	3						
1995/96																								
YR 1 Entry	0							33			11	33	18	55	2	6	2	6						
YR 2 Entry	4	3	75	1	25			20			3	15	16	80	1	5								
YR 4 Entry	0							8			6	75	2	25										
Totals	4	3	75	1	25			61			20	33	36	59	3	5	2	3						
1996/97																								
YR 1 Entry	5	5	100					57	4	7	22	39	24	42	1	2	5	8	1	2				
YR 2 Entry	1	1	100					13			2	15	9	70			2	15						
YR 4 Entry	2	2	100					6			3	50	2	33			1	17						
Totals	8	8	100					76	4	5	27	36	35	46	1	1	8	11	1	1				
1997/98																								
YR 1 Entry	9	5	56	3	33	1	11	58	2	3	29	50	22	38			4	7	1	2				
YR 2 Entry	1	1	100					6			4	67	2	33										
YR 4 Entry	0							4			2	50	1	25			1	25						
Totals	10	6	60	3	30	1	10	68	2	3	35	52	25	37			5	7	1	1				
O/all Total	71	64	90	6	9	1	1	386	9	2	146	38	196	51	10	3	23	6	2	1				

This is a four and a half year programme - four years to degree/four and a half years to Honours - with the third year of the programme spent in industry. (48 week work placement). Students returning from Placement choose whether to progress to the Year 4 Degree Programme or the Year 4 Honours programme therefore their choice of a Degree or Honours Degree qualification is made at that stage in their studies. The award of a Degree with Distinction applies.

So far as the Business Studies Programme is concerned most of the students opt to undertake the Honours Programme. With regards to the 1993/94 and 1994/95 outputs

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the highest level of direct entry for the Degree and the Honours Degree was at Year 4 following the placement year - this being the year that is equivalent to the third year of a non sandwich degree. However, Year 4 entry has steadily declined as indeed has direct entry overall. One might think that this is surprising particularly given that the Business School offers its own linked HNC/HND in Business Administration. However, strong links have been established with local employers and the high regard in which these Diplomates are held so far as employability is concerned has encouraged students to stay on the full HND programme and then to leave with their Diploma and to take up employment - returning to Napier to complete their Business Studies Degree by part-time study.

All of the direct entry students have successfully obtained their degree or honours degree and, of those choosing the degree route, three out of the six Degrees with Distinction awarded went to direct entry students. Again the majority of First Class Honours went to first year entry students although two of the nine awarded went to direct entry students - one who had entered in Year 2 and one who had entered in Year 3. Most of the honours degrees were awarded in the Lower Second classification (196) but a good number of direct entry students (32) achieved Upper Second classifications. Where a Third Class Honours or a Degree at Honours were awarded 27 went to first year entry students compared to eight being awarded to direct entry students - leaving the direct entry students showing a good solid performance across the Upper Second and Lower Second classifications.

BA (Hons) BA Commerce: The output from the BA (Hons) BA Commerce Programme is detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 Analysis of Output from BA (Hons) BA Commerce 1994-98

BA COMMERCE																							
Year of Output	DEGREE OUTPUT							HONOURS OUTPUT															
	Total	Deg	%	Deg Dist	%	Fail W/draw	%	Total	First	%	2/1	%	2/2	%	Third	%	Deg	%	Deg Dist	%	Fail W/draw	%
1993/94																							
YR 1 Entry	11	11	100					59			22	37	35	59			2	4				
YR 2 Entry	13	10	77			3	23	14			6	43	6	43			1	7			1	7
YR 3 Entry	2	1	50			1	50	1							1	100						
Totals	26	22	85			4	15	74			28	38	41	56	1	1	3	4			1	1
1994/95																						
YR 1 Entry	20	14	70	3	15	3	15	56	1	2	20	36	28	50	4	7	3	5				
YR 2 Entry	4	4	100					9			3	33	6	67								
YR 3 Entry	2	2	100					3			1	33	1	33							1	33
Totals	26	20	76	3	12	3	12	68	1	2	24	35	35	51	4	6	3	4			1	2
1995/96																						
YR 1 Entry	20	17	85	3	15			55	1	2	19	34	30	54	2	4	2	4			1	2
YR 2 Entry	8	5	62	3	38			8			1	13	6	74			1	13				
YR 3 Entry	2	1	50		0	1	50	5			1	20	3	60	1	20		0				
Totals	30	23	77	6	20	1	3	68	1	2	21	31	39	57	3	4	3	4			1	2
1996/97																						
YR 1 Entry	22	19	86	3	14			47			16	34	27	58	2	4	1	2	1	2		
YR 2 Entry	13	11	84	1	8	1	8	7			2	29	2	29	2	29	1	13				
YR 3 Entry								3					3	100								
YR 4 Entry								8			5	62	3	38								
Totals	35	30	86	4	11	1	3	65			23	35	35	54	4	6	2	3	1	2		
1997/98																						
YR 1 Entry	6	6	100					38	1	3	25	65	11	29							1	3
YR 2 Entry	3	3	100					7			4	57	3	43								
YR 3 Entry	1					1	100	1			1	100										
YR 4 Entry								7			7	100										
Totals	10	9	90			1	10	53	1	2	37	70	14	26							1	2
O/all Total	127	104	82	13	10	10	8	328	3	1	133	41	164	50	12	4	11	3	1	0	4	1

This is a four year programme - three years to Degree and four years to Honours - with students choosing whether to progress to Year 3 Degree or to Year 3 Honours at the end of their second year. The Honours students are required to complete a 24 week industrial placement in the second semester of their third year. Again the award of a Degree with Distinction applies.

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We see a slightly different pattern of direct entry on the Commerce degree due mainly to the formal articulation links that have been established with Universities in The Netherlands and France. This has led to a number of students entering directly into the fourth (final) honours year - all of whom have obtained their Honours Degree. On this programme direct entry students have achieved fewer Degrees with Distinction than their first year entry colleagues - four compared to nine - and have obtained no First Class Honours qualifications. However, the Direct Entry students were much less likely to obtain a Third Class Honours or a Degree at Honours as were their first year entry colleagues with the latter being awarded 17 qualifications in these categories and the former being awarded 7. So far as failure at Honours level is concerned there is no difference based on point of entry with the four failures being equally divided 2/2 between first and later year entry students. Again the Direct Entry students have turned in good performances in the Upper Second and Lower Second classifications.

7. SUMMARY OF THE OUTPUT PERFORMANCE OF DIRECT ENTRY STUDENTS 1994-98

When focusing on the output performance of the Direct Entry students only it can be seen that, at the Degree level, 11% of Direct Entry students failed to obtain their degree and, at the Honours' level, 1% failed to achieve an Honours qualification. Overall only 6% of the total number of 465 direct entry students failed to achieve the qualification for which they were studying. However, this does not mean that these students achieved nothing for their year/s of study on the Degree programmes. The

University as a whole has a range of exit qualifications available for successful completion of each stage of its Degrees as follows: Certificate of Higher Education at the end of Year 1; Diploma of Higher Education at the end of Year 2 and Degree (while studying on an Honours' Programme) at the end of Year 3.

This means that only 15 students - or in percentage terms 3% - failed to achieve a qualification at a level higher than the qualification that they held on entry-11 on the Accounting degree; none on the Business Studies Programme and 3 on the Commerce Degree and 1 on the Commerce Honours Degree—a total of 15 students.

Of the total number of direct entry students choosing to exit with a degree, ie not including those Accounting students who proceeded to Honours, 9% obtained a Degree with Distinction and 77% obtained a Degree. At Honours level 95% of Direct Entry students obtained an Honours degree and 4% were awarded a Degree at Honours level. The highest percentage of passes was in the Lower Second classification- 25% - and 17% obtained an Upper Second classification.

8. SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF INTAKE ACROSS THE THREE DEGREES

An alternative approach would be to track the performance of all students from their point of entry to their point of leaving and this is an approach being taken in another study. However a sample of the findings of that study are detailed in Table 4

Table 4 Sample Analysis by Intake Across the Three Degrees

DEGREE	YEAR OF INTAKE		Totals	Deg	Deg Dist	First	2/1	2/2	Third	Fail W/draw	Total Gaining Deg/Hons	% of Total Gaining Deg/Hons
BA COMMERCE	1991/92	YR 1 Entry	86	14		1	20	28	4	19	67	78
		YR 2 Entry	45	16	3		6	7		13	32	71
		YR 3 Entry	7	2	3			2			7	100
		Totals	138	32	6	1	26	37	4	32	106	77
	1992/93	YR 1 Entry	106	16	3	1	19	30	2	35	71	67
		YR 2 Entry	24	8			1	8		7	17	71
		YR 3 Entry	4	2	1				1		4	100
		Totals	134	26	4	1	20	38	3	42	92	69
	1994/95	YR 1 Entry	94	19	3	1	25	11		35	59	63
		YR 2 Entry	21	6	3		2	2	2	6	15	71
		YR 3 Entry	7	2			1	3	1		7	100
		Totals	122	27	6	1	28	16	3	41	81	66
BA ACCOUNTING	1991/92	YR 1 Entry	46	10	2	3	5	22	3	1	45	98
		YR 2 Entry	13	8			1	3	1		13	100
		YR 3 Entry	10	4				2	2	2	8	80
		Totals	69	22	2	3	6	27	6	3	66	96
	1992/93	YR 1 Entry	36	13	4	1	8	7	2	1	35	97
		YR 2 Entry	18	4	4	1		7	2		18	100
		YR 3 Entry	13	9	1		1	1	1		13	100
		Totals	67	26	9	2	9	15	5	1	66	99
	1994/95	YR 1 Entry	26	7	1		5	9		4	22	85
		YR 2 Entry	15	4			3	4		4	11	73
		YR 3 Entry	17	15	2						17	100
		Totals	58	26	3	0	8	13	0	8	50	86
BA BUSINESS STUDIES	1991/92	YR 1 Entry	58	9		11	18	2		18	40	69
		YR 2 Entry	18	3		1	3	10	1		18	100
		YR 4 Entry	28	20	7					1	27	96
		Totals	104	32	7	12	21	12	1	19	85	82
	1992/93	YR 1 Entry	81	5	1	4	22	24	1	24	57	70
		YR 2 Entry	23	3			3	16	1		23	100
		YR 4 Entry	14	0			2	12			14	100
		Totals	118	8	1	4	27	52	2	24	94	80
	1994/95	YR 1 Entry	100	7	3	4	31	9		46	54	54
		YR 2 Entry	7	1			4	2			7	100
		YR 4 Entry	20	12			6	2			20	100
		Totals	127	20	3	4	41	13	0	46	81	64
OVERALL TOTALS			937	219	41	28	186	223	24	216	721	77

Using this approach it can be seen that generally speaking the Direct Entry students outperform the first year entry students so far as the percentage actually gaining a Degree or Honours Degree qualification is concerned. Out of the 27 sample cohorts in three intake years for each of the three degree programmes it can be seen that 15 of the direct entry cohorts had higher percentage completion rates than that achieved by the first year entry cohorts. Indeed when looking at the overall completion rates for each group of students ie first year entry; second year entry; third/fourth year entry

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the first year entry students are left well behind so far as the achievement of Degree or Honours Degree qualifications are concerned - the percentage achievement figures being: First Year Entry; 71%; Second Year Entry 84%; Third Year Entry 98%.

There are a number of reasons for this. First year entry students are "untested" so far as Higher Education is concerned and may be unsure as to what programme they wish to follow, or if they want to be in Higher Education at all, being relatively immature with age on entry normally being 17 or 18. In their first year they have to become accustomed to a teaching and learning environment that is very different to that in secondary school and they may also be coming to terms with living away from home for the first time with all of the social and economic implications that that entails. All of this has led to a significant drop out rate in the past at the end of first year.

Those entering in the later years are older, more mature, have "tasted" Higher Education and have made the positive decision to continue their studies at a higher level. They have proved themselves to be academically capable through their performance on their HNC or HND programme and are committed to gaining a Degree or Honours Degree in the shortest possible timescale.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions-based on six years of research into this topic and on the outcomes of this five year study in particular - are that:

- Institutions in both sectors can increase student intake in targeted areas and at levels that suit them best without prejudicing the quality of the provision or of the students' learning experience.
- Students, from a variety of backgrounds and with varied educational experience can progress by the shortest route to achieve the highest possible qualification commensurate with their level of ability. This in turn means a better qualified workforce for the nation as a whole.
- Less mature students benefit personally and financially from being able to remain in their home and local environment for one or two years after leaving school before having to leave home to pursue their studies at the University of their choice. They are therefore more mature when they finally take up a place at University and better able to cope with all that life at University entails.
- The University benefits from guaranteed academically capable direct entry intakes in the second and third years of their Degree programmes which help to maintain or marginally increase student numbers overall despite the demographic downturn and increased competition in the HE sector.
- The FE College benefits by being able to use the direct entry route to later years of University Degree programmes as a marketing tool to attract students to its HNC and HND programmes. In addition staff of the FE College can teach on these higher level programmes thus contributing to their professional development and increasing their satisfaction in their role in education.
- The Direct Entry students perform better than the first year entry students so far as completion rates are concerned.

10. QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The major impact of "Higher Still" for HE Institutions will be the introduction of the new "Advanced Higher" deemed to be "equivalent" to the first year of an undergraduate degree and to an HNC. This raises the question of permitting those holding Advanced Higher qualifications direct entry to the second year of degree programmes. Concern has been expressed that while this may be appropriate in certain subject areas it may not be so in others particularly where accreditation by Professional Bodies is required before a degree can be considered to be relevant for exemption purposes. While technically Universities have the right to set their own entry standards the demographic decline resulting in increasing competition for fewer students could pressurise Institutions into offering advanced entry against their better judgement on the basis of "Advanced Highers" in order to attract students to their programmes - the shorter programme duration being financially more attractive to students. This is a question that the Business School is still to address.

Worryingly there has been an emerging trend for Professional Bodies in the Engineering and the Accounting areas to withdraw accreditation from Degree programmes where direct entry from HNC/HND Programmes is permitted-contrary to the Government's policy on wider access and flexible learning routes! The main concern expressed by these Bodies has been their lack of control over the subjects and the subject content studied by the Direct Entry students prior to their entry to the Degree itself. The Bodies believe that they cannot therefore assure themselves that the quality of the overall learning experience is appropriate to warrant accredited status.

However, given that all assessments at Levels 3 and 4 (Years 3, 4, 5) of the Degree programmes are subject to External Examiner moderation and that, in the UK,the External Examiner system is seen as the safeguard of academic standards across the HE Institutions, it is difficult to see the validity of this concern when all students, regardless of their point of entry, will have successfully completed these moderated assessments in their Degree and Honours Degree years prior to being awarded their qualification.

The Universities will have to face this problem of non-acceptance by the Professional Bodies as a matter of urgency perhaps by establishing two parallel degrees - one confined to entry at year one only that will attract maximum accreditation for those students intending to enter the profession and one open to advanced entry students that will not be accredited by the Profession but will provide an academic qualification for employment or for further study outwith the Profession. However, there are dangers in this approach -

- how many first year students know whether or not they want to enter the professions?
- Would the non accredited degree be seen as an inferior degree leading to problems of recognition by potential employers?

These questions, so far as the Accounting Degree is concerned, will have to be answered by the Business School as a matter of urgency.

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